The Siege of Mecca by Yaroslav Trofimov

(New York: Doubleday, 2007)
Reviewed by Matthew Magolan

The terrorist siege of the Grand Mosque at Mecca in Saudi Arabia between November 20 and December 4, 1979 has been relegated to a footnote in the American historical consciousness. The siege was sandwiched between the beginning of both the U.S. Iranian Embassy hostage crisis, which began on November 4, 1979, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on December 24th of the same year. The details surrounding the unprecedented attack on Islam's holiest mosque reveal information that foreshadows the deadly brand of global terrorism which rose from the fundamentalist *Wahhabi Sunni* Islamic tradition of Saudi Arabia and threatens the United States to this day. *The Siege of Mecca* by Yaroslav Trofimov is a well-researched and insightful account of the extraordinary events in which over 200 Islamic militants took the holiest site in the Muslim faith by the force of arms.

The *Fedayeen* style assault on Mecca served as a rough blueprint for the Mumbai attack in November 2008, the Mehran Naval air station attack in Pakistan during May 2011, the Intercontinental Hotel attack in Afghanistan in June 2011, the attack by 100 militants on a police station in Pakistan in October 2012, and the attack on the Westgate Mall in Kenya in September 2013. It seems that old has become new again and analysts indicate that small unit-small arms type attacks will be among the most preferred terrorist attack methods of the future.[1] Unlike other countries where elite military units respond to these attacks, American police officers will be tasked with an effective initial response to a small unit-small arms attack in the United States. *The Siege of Mecca* is an excellent account of the terrorist uprising at Mecca, which presents valuable lessons for both American law enforcement and the greater homeland security community.

Trofimov has covered Saudi Arabia for the *Wall Street Journal* since 1999 and his ability to explain the greater context of the siege is evident. The author effortlessly weaves history, politics, religion, sociology and the event itself into a cohesive narrative that reads more like an action thriller than the genuine work of investigative journalism that it is. Juhayman al Uteybi, a charismatic preacher in *madrassas* (Islamic schools) in Saudi Arabia, was the mastermind behind the plot. Juhayman began teaching in state sponsored madrassas spreading the doctrine of Wahhabi Sunni Islam, but became disenfranchised when the western-influenced modernization of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was contradictory to the spare and puritanical teachings of this tradition. Juhayman first attempts to enlist his own teachers from the *Ulema* (a body of clerics who direct the spiritual and moral compass of Saudi Arabia) to publicly recognize the hypocrisy of the Royal Family. When he is rebuffed by the Ulema and their realpolitik attitude toward the Royal Family, Juhayman believes that they too are hypocrites and sets off on his violent path.

The narrative of Juhayman's descent into violent anti-establishment Islamic radicalism reads similarly to that of domestic serial bomber Eric Rudolph's downward spiral into violent anti-establishment Army of God Christian radicalism.[2] A poignant point, for me, was that radicalism is radicalism no matter which Book it comes from. The warning signs and mentality are doppelgänger profiles on opposite sides of the same coin. The madrassas in Saudi Arabia where Juhayman taught were fertile grounds for him to recruit devout acolytes. Young men raised in the Wahhabi tradition and conscious of the obvious incongruity between the Wahhabi lip service of the Royal Family with the cover of the Ulema and the reality of their actions. From these committed madrassa students, many of whom had been tactically trained in the Saudi

Arabian National Guard, Juhayman built his Fedayeen army.

The book tackles the quandary of the duality of the Saudi Arabian state: on one hand, a staunch political ally of the United States and much of the modern West, but, on the other hand, the premier worldwide conduit of radical Wahhabi Sunni Islamic beliefs which call for the destruction of the non-Sunni world. Trofimov paints a vivid portrait of the history of Saudi Arabia. Beginning with nomadic Bedouin origins in the *Nejd*, he follows the rise and fall of conquerors, kings and scoundrels, ending, finally, with the rise of al Saud and the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Sunni populace of Saudi Arabia is torn between allegiance to the Al Saud family and the Quran as interpreted by the ultra-fundamentalist Ulema. Trofimov connects the dots of this complex history in a descriptive narrative.

Much of Juhayman's anti-Royal Family sentiment was initially stoked by the Ulema who often questioned, but never overtly challenged, the Saudi Royal Family. In an interesting plot twist of the siege, the Saudi Royals must bargain with the Ulema to gain a *fatwa* (ruling) that will allow the Saudi government to attack the terrorists in Mecca, even though it is forbidden to carry weapons or fight in Mecca according to the *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet). The end result of the need for the *fatwa* was that the Ulema used its leverage to exact a promise from the Saudi government to pay billions of petro-dollars toward more madrassas. These new madrassas would spread even more of the same fiery Wahhabi fundamentalist Islamic rhetoric that created the siege in the first place: an ironic state of affairs that would create far-reaching ramifications felt to this very day.

Juhayman believed he had the full force of the hadith behind him. Juhayman and his men believed that one of his men, Mohammad Abdullah al Quraysh, was the *Mahdi*, an invincible Islamic redeemer who, according to Islamic lore, will lead Muslins to an ideal Islamic world after an apocalyptic clash with the forces of evil (including all non-believers). This apocalyptic belief was the final push for Juhayman and his men to take over the mosque. The House of al Saud had to re-take the mosque to save face among the Islamic world at large.

The Saudi government forces were handed defeat after defeat in battle after battle with Juhayman's small army, who were motivated by religious fervor, tactically trained and in defensive positions throughout the fortress-like mosque. Only when the armored brigades of the Saudi Army used M113 armored personnel carriers, artillery, and TOW missiles did the Saudi government forces gain even a foothold in the courtyard on the ground level of the Grand Mosque. This was only after more than a week of heavy fighting. Juhayman and his men then retreated to the *Qaboo*, a labyrinthine maze of narrow chambers and corridors underneath the mosque where the terrorists would make their final stand.

The Saudi forces had poor intelligence and inaccurate blueprints for the *Qaboo*. Juhayman's men, many of whom had intimate personal knowledge of the layout of the *Qaboo* from their religious observances at the mosque, made the counter-assault a deadly mission. Even as the Saudi government tried to tell the world that the terrorists had been defeated, the fighting raged on. In near desperation, the Saudis turned secretly to the expertise of the elite French counter-terrorism unit *Group d'Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale* (GIGN). Interestingly, Trofimov explains numerous times in his narrative that the Saudis failed to recognize the siege as a military problem, but then seemingly misses the fact that the GIGN is a special paramilitary police force similar to the FBI Hostage Rescue Team: a small misinterpretation of the grey world of tier I counter-terrorism units in an otherwise excellent narrative.

After two weeks of outright warfare, three GIGN Commandos, acting only in an advisory role, finally gave the Saudi forces the tools, tactics, and training needed to overcome Juhayman's men. The casualties on both sides were enormous. Saudi government sources place the rebel casualties at 117 dead and 150 captured. The Saudi government also claims that 127 soldiers were killed along with 450 wounded. Western intelligence estimates place

all of the dead at over 1,000. The true numbers will likely never be known.

Trofimov conducted his research without the consent of the Saudi government, which still keeps the information from the siege classified. The Saudis have even kept most of the information about the siege from western intelligence agencies. The ironclad grip the Saudi government maintains on any information related to the event makes *The Siege of Mecca* an even more impressive journalistic accomplishment.

Trofimov describes the ripples of violence spreading throughout the region in this tumultuous time. The US embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan was burned to the ground when the Iranians wrongly blamed the siege of Mecca on US and Israeli paratroopers. The US Embassy in Tripoli, Libya was overrun by protestors. All over the Muslim world icons of the West were burned, destroyed, or looted by misinformed people believing that Western forces were responsible for the siege at Mecca. Trofimov makes an airtight case that the siege at Mecca was a catalyzing event for widespread contemporaneous unrest throughout the Middle East. The book finally connects the events of Mecca with the modern fundamentalist Islamic threats faced by the United States and our allies. The small multi-national army Juhayman assembled was, in many ways, a blueprint for Al Qaeda. Hindsight is always 20/20, but Trofimov has found a lens that focuses seemingly distant historical events into a clear picture of how those events directly influence the present and future of international terrorism and counterterrorism.

Although it is unlikely that American law enforcement officers will see a small unit-small arms assault comprised of over 200 attackers on American soil, it is exceedingly possible that a smaller small unit-small arms terrorist attack will occur in the United States within the next ten years. Small arms attacks are among the easiest types of attacks to perpetrate in our post 9/11 society. Small arms are readily available in the United States and, with the right connections and funding, across our border to the south.[3] Instability due to the narco-war in Mexico creates a permissive environment for the possible infiltration of individuals wishing to inflict harm upon the American people.[4] And with the killing of Osama Bin Laden, our fundamentalist Islamic enemies have a new motivation to find novel ways to attack the United States,[5] sowing the seeds of terror anew.

Our enemies have a long memory and infinite patience. *The Siege of Mecca* by Yaroslav Trofimov gives American law enforcement a unique view into the roots of modern fundamentalist Islamic terrorism within an important historical context. A context that directly influences our current and future homeland defense challenges with an adaptive and unwavering enemy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES

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2. "Eric Rudolph's Manifesto," Associated Press, April 18, 2005, http://archive.decaturdaily.com/decaturdaily/news/050418/manifesto.shtml.

3. Ioan Grillo, "Mexico's Drug Lords Ramp up Their Arsenals with RPGs," Time World, October 25, 2012, http://world.time.com/2012/10/25/mexicos-drug-lords-ramp-up-their-arsenals-with-rpgs/#ixzz2AdtkCXEG

4. Deroy Murdock, "The Southern Border: Our Welcome Mat for Terrorists," National Review Online, April 25, 2013, http://www.nationalreview.com/article/346591/southern-border-our-welcome-mat-terrorists.

5. "Lashkar-e-Taiba Surpasses al-Qaeda as the Biggest Terrorist Threat from South Asia, Says TRAC," Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC), posted October 16, 2012, http://www.prweb.com/releases/2012/10/prweb10015059.htm.